This article was published as:

Crosbie, Barbara (2013). Anne Fisher's New Grammar: Textbooks and Teaching in Eighteenth-Century Newcastle Upon Tyne. *Publishing History* **LXXIV**: 49-65.

ANNE FISHER'S *NEW GRAMMAR*: TEXTBOOKS AND TEACHING IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

by BARBARA CROSBIE

The middle decades of the eighteenth century saw an upsurge in commercial schooling across England, and textbooks such as Anne Fisher's *New Grammar* (1745) provide some of the most tangible evidence of the links between this educational development and the book trade. This was a mutually beneficial association. As more schools opened they created a greater demand for textbooks. Concomitantly, the increasing availability of these textbooks improved the standard of educational provision, giving rise to a more literate customer base for the growing number of printers. That said, there were significant regional variations in literacy rates, with some areas and social groups witnessing a decline during the century.[1] Moreover, it should not be assumed that printers were somehow dependent upon improvements in schooling. It is possible to point to a wide range of economic and cultural factors that contributed to the expansion of the print trade during the eighteenth century, and by the time Fisher published her *New Grammar* in Newcastle upon Tyne the town had already become one of the most important provincial printing centres in England.[2] Nevertheless, looking at the context in which Fisher's textbook was produced, and the ways that it influenced educational practice, brings the interdependent relationship between printers and pedagogues to the fore. It also questions the often repeated assumption that the education on offer in the eighteenth-century classroom was

[1] R. A. Houston, 'The Development of Literacy: Northern England, 1640-1750', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 35, No. 2 (May, 1982), pp. 199-216; Schofield, Roger, 'Dimensions of Illiteracy, 1750-1850', *Explorations in Economic History*, 10:4 (1973), pp.437-454.

[2] John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (London, 1997), p. 504; Helen Berry, 'Promoting Taste in the Provincial Press: National and Local Culture in Eighteenth-Century Newcastle upon Tyne', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 1 (Spring 2002), p. 1; Barbara Crosbie, 'Provincial Purveyors of Culture: The Print Trade in Newcastle upon Tyne, 1700-1800' in Barbara Crosbie and Adrian Green (eds.), *Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500-1800*, forthcoming.

ineffectual, especially schooling for girls, who (we are led to believe) gained little if any academic training.[3]

It is unclear when Fisher moved to Newcastle upon Tyne, but she was living in the town when she published her grammar in 1745 and this is where she spent the remainder of her life. She was born on the other side of the Pennines, at a farmstead or hamlet known as Old Scales, just outside of Lorton in 1719. This was just twenty-four years after the London Stationers' monopoly on publishing came to an end with the lapsing of the licensing laws, and only eleven years after Newcastle's first permanent printer John White, opened for business in 1708.[4] When Fisher died at the age of fifty-nine in 1778, Newcastle was home to at least twenty printers.[5] This was part of a more general growth in printing, and it is fair to say that the print trade in England had been fundamentally transformed during Fisher's lifetime. This was particularly true of Fisher's home town; even if England's northernmost printing centre was about to lose its position at the top of the provincial printing league table as towns such as Manchester began to outstrip Newcastle's output.[6] The volume and range of publications produced on the banks of the Tyne had expanded exponentially. A more literate reading public had access to a greater quantity of books than ever before. Fisher had played an active role in this printing revolution. Yet, although it would be

[3] Deborah Simonton, 'Women and Education' in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Women's History: Britain, 1700-1850* (London, 2005), pp. 33-56; Susan Skedd, 'Women Teachers and the Expansion of Girls' Schooling in England, c.1760-1829' in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1997), pp. 101-125.
[4] Victoria Gardner 'John White and the Newcastle Newspaper Trade, 1711–69' in C. Armstrong and J. Hinks (eds.), *Book Trade Connections from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (London, 2007), 73; Crosbie, 'Provincial Purveyors of Culture'.
[5] See BBTI (The British Book Trade Index).
[6] Crosbie, 'Provincial Purveyors of Culture'.

wrong to suggest that she has been overlooked by historians, this remarkable woman has not tended to attract the attention that might be expected given her achievements.[7]

There are several reasons why this yeoman's daughter from Cumberland offers a particularly useful case study for an investigation of the links between education and the book trade. First and foremost is the fact that at the age of twenty-six she published *A New Grammar*. In doing so Fisher made a significant contribution to an ongoing debate about the structure of the English language, but more importantly in this context she had produced an accessible and popular textbook for use in the classroom. Fisher had also encroached upon the very masculine sphere of the grammarian, and was only the second woman to publish an English grammar, the first being Elizabeth Elstob, who published *The Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* in 1715. It may be for this reason that Fisher initially chose to publish anonymously. In June 1745, just months after her *New Grammar* appeared in print, a notice in the *Newcastle Journal* informed the reader that 'Anne Fisher' had opened a school in Newcastle, where she was to teach 'READING, according to the best Spelling-books and Grammars extant, [alongside] WRITING, [and both] fine and plain SEWING'.[8] Fisher must have attracted sufficient numbers of pupils to sustain a viable business as 'Mrs Fisher's School' was advertised again in 1750. This was, however, the last recorded evidence of her teaching career and it is likely that she gave up this venture the following year when she married the printer Thomas Slack;

[7] Karen Cajka, 'The forgotten women grammarians of eighteenth-century England', (University of Connecticut PhD Thesis, 2003), chapter two; Peter Isaac, 'Fisher, Anne (1719-1778)', ODNB (Oxford, 2004); Michael, Ian, *The Teaching of English: from the sixteenth century to 1780* (Cambridge, 1987); María Esther Rodríguez-Gil, 'Ann Fisher: First Female Grammarian', *Historical Sociolinguistics and Sociohistorical Linguistics*, 2 (2002), http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/hsl_shl/rodriguez-gil.htm; Horsley, P. M., *Eighteenth Century Newcastle* (Newcastle, 1971), pp. 191-196; Barbara Crosbie, 'The Rising Generations: A Northern Perspective on Age Relations and the Contours of Cultural Change, England c.1740-1785', (Durham University Ph.D. thesis, 2011), Chapter Two.

[8] *Newcastle Journal*, 29 June 1745.

who was at this time employed by Fisher's publisher (Isaac Thompson).[9] Although Fisher had apparently given up teaching, her marriage did not signal the end of her working life. The Slacks would go on to establish an extremely lucrative printing business whilst raising a family of nine daughters, six of whom survived to adulthood.[10] It was only after she became Mrs Slack that Anne acknowledged her authorship of *A New Grammar* and even then she published under her maiden name; and she continued throughout her married life to write educational books that were credited to the gender-neutral 'A Fisher', with titles including *The Pleasing Instructor: or, entertaining moralist* (2nd edn., 1756), *The New English Tutor* (1762), *A New English Exercise Book* (1770), and *An Accurate New Spelling Dictionary* (2nd. edn., 1773). Thus, the Slacks personify the marriage between printers and pedagogues that was to have a profound impact upon eighteenth-century schooling.

The Slacks were not the only printers in Newcastle with such a direct connection to the classroom. Fisher's first publisher, Isaac Thompson, had opened a school in Newcastle prior to establishing his printing business in 1739.[11] Like Fisher's school, this appears to have been a relatively short-lived venture, but these were just two of a growing number of privately-run schools that opened for business during the middle decades of the century. Some of these schools competed with elementary charity schools, and others with endowed grammar schools. There were dissenters, such as Isaac Thompson, who aimed to provide a more practical education than was on offer in existing institutions, whilst some teachers, like Anne Fisher, provided school-based education for pupils more conventionally taught at home. Although this

[9] Ibid., 28 April 1750.
[10] Cajka, 'The forgotten women grammarians of eighteenth-century England', p. 23.
[11] This school was advertised in the *Newcastle Courant,* 29 March 1735.

new provision was disparate in terms of the type of schooling offered, in combination it represented a notable development.[12]

Education had become a commercial enterprise and, however successful the individual schools were, there was evidently a high level of demand for such institutions across the social spectrum. Yet, the long-term influence of this trend tends to be downplayed, in large part because the 1770s and 1780s are linked to the renewed popularity of more traditional forms of schooling. This is most evident in the case of boys' grammar schools, where pupil numbers appear to have waned mid-century before recovering during the 1780s.[13] As Paul Langford notes, English was one of the subjects added to the classical curriculum in these endowed schools as they sought to maintain or regain their status.[14] But this has not generally been associated with improving educational standards. Instead, attention is more likely to be placed upon the mid-century fashion for teaching social accomplishments such as dancing. There were contemporary commentators who dismissed these additions to the syllabus as 'education made easy' and, as a consequence, the rigours of a grammar school education can appear to have been lost during these decades. Langford points to the programme of learning advocated by John Knox in his *Liberal Education* (1781) as an indication of a return to more demanding methods.[15] At the same time, the mid-century popularity of girls' boarding schools appears to have been replaced by a renewed fashion for home education, and the 1770s have been linked to the rise

[12] See Crosbie, 'The Rising Generations', chapter two.
[13] Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People* (Oxford, 1989), p. 79; Francis John Gibson Robinson, 'Trends in Education in Northern England during the Eighteenth Century: a biographical study (Newcastle University PhD Thesis, 1972)
[14] Langford, *Polite and Commercial*, p. 80; also John Money, 'Teaching in the Market Place' in Brewer and Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993), p. 337.
[15] Langford, *Polite and Commercial*, p. 88;

of the governess.[16] These decades also witnessed a resurgence of religious schooling for the poor in the form of the Sunday school movement.[17] It is, nevertheless, misleading to suggest that mid-century innovations can be dismissed as unimportant. Tracing Fisher's influence demonstrates that fundamental change had taken place, but before turning to evidence of practice in the classroom it will be useful to briefly consider the significance of Fisher's *New Grammar* and to look at how her approach to grammar was linked to her teaching methods.

The eighteenth century has long been recognised as a period of standardisation in terms of the English language; a period when spelling became more uniform, and when the last vestiges of early-modern scribal hands eventually fell from usage. There is, lurking somewhere in the recesses of the popular imagination, a misguided notion that Samuel Johnson published the first English dictionary during the century and that this was somehow part of a movement that saw the Anglo-Saxon of Shakespearean England usurped by an elitist Latinate version of English.[18] In truth, the first single language English dictionary was Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabetical* (1604), and so Johnson's dictionary missed out on this accolade by more than a century. Moreover, the evolution of the English language at this time cannot be reduced to a dichotomy between increasingly marginalised grass-roots forms of expression and an affected high culture. In many respects, as Ian Michael points out, the most notable change in attitudes towards English grammar that occurred during the eighteenth century was a

---

[16] Anthony Fletcher, *Growing up in England: the experience of childhood, 1600-1914* (London, 2008), p. 222; Deborah Simonton, 'Women and Education' in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Women's History: Britain, 1700-1850* (London, 2005), pp. 33-56.

[17] M.G. Jones, *The Charity School Movement* (London, 1964); Deborah Simonton 'Schooling the Poor: gender and class in eighteenth-century England', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 23 (2000), pp. 183-202; Joan Simon, 'Was there a Charity School Movement? The Leicestershire Evidence' in Brian Simon (ed.), *Education in Leicestershire, 1540-1940* (Leicester, 1968), pp. 55-102.

[18] For a particularly polemic account see Borkowski, David, 'Class(ifying) Language: The War of the Word', Rhetoric Review, 21:4 (2002), pp. 357-383; also see David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 80.

shift away from the philosophical quest for a universal grammar as eighteenth-century grammarians lost sight of the intellectual debates that had preoccupied their seventeenth-century counterparts.[19] Moreover, it can be argued that, far from being a top-down imposition, the emergence of a more standardised form of English grammar was market-driven.[20] Nowhere is this more evident than in the commercial school sector of the mid-eighteenth century where teachers of English competed in an ever more crowded marketplace. It was in this environment that the young Anne Fisher established herself as a grammarian, and it is within this context that her books need to be understood.

Fisher presumably aimed to earn a living as a school teacher but there were evidently greater opportunities to turn a profit as an author of educational books, and there can be little doubt that she was an astute business woman. Despite securing a publishing deal in London early in her career, Fisher retained the right to print her books in Newcastle and to market them locally.[21] As a consequence, titles were frequently published simultaneously in both Newcastle and London, and these books were often popular enough to warrant numerous reprints. But none were as successful as her first publication – *A New Grammar*. More that forty editions of this book had been published by 1800.[22] It was pirated and plagiarised, and its influence can be clearly seen in many of the grammars written over the following decades. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of the size of the print runs, but there were only

[19] Ian Michael, *English Grammatical Categories and the Tradition to 1800* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 182, 517.
[20] Crosbie, 'The Rising Generations', chapter two.
[21] The Slacks retained the copyright to *A New Grammar* and *An Accurate New Spelling Dictionary* and shared the copyright of Fisher's other books with her London publisher, but all of her books were printed in Newcastle; Cajka, 'The forgotten women grammarians of eighteenth-century England', pp. 58-9.
[22] Michael, Grammatical Categories, p. 509; although Cajka suggests the legitimate reprints only reached edition 31 by 1800, Cajka, 'The forgotten women grammarians of eighteenth-century England', p. 59.

three English grammars written during the eighteenth century that went on to be reprinted more often; these being the grammars of Lowth (1762), Ash (1766), and Murray (1795).[23] Fisher can, therefore, be described as one of the most important grammarians of her age if this is measured in relation to the commercial success of her grammar.

Fisher's grammar was also one of the earliest of the reforming vernacular grammars identified by Ian Michael.[24] But the eighteenth-century debates surrounding the nature of English grammar are too complex to address here, and it is suffice to say that that these grammars were distinguished from the more Latinate English grammars by their use of vernacular terminology (such as 'name' in place of 'noun') and a fourfold division of the parts of speech, as opposed to the predominant eight-part Latinate system.[25] To understand the significance of this within the context of educational provision it is important to recognise that grammar was traditionally taught in Latin and had been the preserve of older boys from the more affluent ranks of society. Grammars written in English had been designed to introduce these classical scholars to the concept of grammar. Fisher complained that most of these were 'so *dependent* upon the *Latin*' they were '*only* Translations'. For those learning English, they introduced '*superfluous* Cases, Genders, Moods, and Tenses' that simply added '*needless* Perplexities'.[26] Vernacular grammars were, it was claimed, more accessible and more practical for the scholar of English. Furthermore, Fisher not only questioned the idea that an adequate grasp of English could be picked up without

[23] Rodríguez-Gil, 'First Female Grammarian'; for number of editions see Michael, *Grammatical Categories*, p. 509.
[24] Ibid.
[25] There was in fact considerable variation in the Latinate systems, but the most common comprised of noun, pronoun, verb, participle, adverb, conjunction, preposition, and interjection. Likewise, fourfold systems were not uniform and Michael identifies eleven variations.
[26] A. Fisher, *The Pleasing Instructor* (Newcastle, 1765), p. vii.

an understanding of English grammar, she also thought vernacular grammar provided a more effective foundation for the learning of other languages; arguing that because 'some general Rules of Grammar are universally applied in all Tongues', any scholar of English would find it easier to learn another language, unlike those children who learn their mother tongue by rote or by custom.[27] Yet despite this reference to universality, Fisher was more interested in practical pedagogy than the philosophical nuances of grammar. She produced a textbook premised upon spoken English, and although she was not averse to promoting her own prejudices when it came to 'correct' usage, this was not an English grammar designed (or as some claimed, contorted) to explain Latinate rules.

It was not just the form of Fisher's grammar that was innovative; she also challenged the teaching methods of the old Latin masters. In her *Thoughts on Education* (which appeared by way of an introduction to *The Pleasing Instructor*) Fisher noted that 'an austere or learned pedant has sometimes whipped Latin and Greek into a Lad', but such an approach could only ever result in the short-term retention of information, and would never instil a love of learning.[28] According to Fisher those who advocated the liberal use of the rod could do no more than train the memory, as opposed to developing understanding, and in her *New English Tutor* (1762) she reminded her readers that it was not 'the unmeaning Repetition of Rules' but 'Application and Practice' that made them familiar. For this, scholars needed to begin with the grammar of their mother tongue so that they could comprehend what they were being taught.[29] Significantly, because this was grammar without the pedantry associated with a classical education, it was a subject suitable for young

[27] A. Fisher, *A New Grammar*, 3rd edn., (London, 1753), pp. i-ii.
[28] Fisher, *The Pleasing Instructor*, p. ii.
[29] Fisher, *The New English Tutor*, p. vi.

ladies. In this respect Fisher was undoubtedly a trailblazer. In her *Thoughts on Education*, she lamented that young ladies were mostly put to sewing under the care of some mistress who was either incapable of assisting them in the pursuit of knowledge or lacked the time to direct their reading. Worse still there were those 'who have not a book in their schools, or such only as are no way suitable for youth'.[30] Fisher sought to redress this as both a teacher and an author of educational books, but her interest in girls' education should not be allowed to obscure the wider appeal of her *New Grammar*. This was a textbook designed for children, taught at home or in the classroom, regardless of gender. As she claimed in the preface, by using her methods 'any Person of a tolerable Capacity may, in a short Time, be Learned to write ENGLISH independent of the Knowledge of any other Tongue, and that as properly and correctly as if for the PRESS.'[31]

Fisher regularly used the local press to promote her educational theories. When advertising *The Pleasing Instructor; or Entertaining Moralist*, for instance, she quoted from her *Thoughts on Education*, noting:

> Herein is exhibited a connected Plan of Morality, free from jumble and incoherence; and the UTILE DULCI having been consulted throughout the whole, Morality here appears gay and smiling, steals insensibly into our good Graces, and makes the most lasting impressions, being divested of that unpleasing Formality with which she is too often disguised by partial or mistaken Pedants.[32]

As this suggests, her books aimed to be both 'useful and agreeable'; and it is important to recognise that she was, first and foremost, a practical educationist who was interested in the most effective means of engaging pupils in the learning process. She even changed the title of her grammar to *A Practical New Grammar* in 1762 as a response to increasing competition. Her down-to-earth approach can be clearly seen in

[30] Fisher, *The Pleasing Instructor*, p. ix.
[31] Fisher, *A New Grammar*, 3rd edn., p. v.
[32] *Newcastle Chronicle*, 5 January 1765.

the advertisement for her school that appeared in 1750. Here she informed the reader that she was to teach 'ENGLISH GRAMMAR ... betwixt the hours of Five and Eight at Night' to 'Young ladies' who were unable to 'conveniently attend on SCHOOL HOURS'. This was practical and efficient education for those with daytime responsibilities, and echoing the claim made in her *New Grammar*, she stated that 'Any YOUNG LADY, of a tolerable Capacity, who can read pretty well, and write a legible Hand, may, in a few Months, be completed in this Way, at a reasonable Rate.'[33] But rather than simply advertising her school, Fisher used this notice to promote her teaching methods, and prospective customers were told that 'Young Ladies' were to 'Be instructed under the following HEADS':

> THE peculiar SOUNDS of the several LETTERS.
>
> To spell and divide by Rule.
>
> An exact and proper METHOD of READING according to the Points, Cadence, and Emphasis.
>
> A critical Knowledge of the various Kinds of Words, and Parts of SPEECH to which each Word particularly belongs; with the comparing of Qualities, forming of Verbs, stating of Pronouns, &c.
>
> AND LIKEWISE,
>
> To concord and construct Words in Sentences or Sentences together, consistent with the Manner of the Best *English* Writers.

Fisher also questioned the value of rote learning, noting that:

> Whatever may be pretended, or whatever Pains taken by Rote, it is presumed that no continuing certainty, or perfect correctness in Spelling ... or even a tolerable Judgement in any kind of Writing, can be acquired by an English scholar, without a thorough knowledge of grammar in all its parts'.

Tellingly, this explicit statement of her approach to learning appeared alongside an advertisement for *A New Grammar*, in which her book was described as 'the most easy guide to speaking and writing the English language'.[34] Although Fisher's grammar was still being published anonymously at this time, and no direct connection

[33] *Newcastle Journal*, 28 April 1750.
[34] Ibid

was made between these two notices, in tandem they reiterated the idea that some methods of learning grammar offered better value for money than others.

Fisher's public profile was undoubtedly raised by the fact that her books were initially printed by Isaac Thompson, the proprietor of the *Newcastle Journal*, and then by her husband Thomas Slacks, with whom she established the *Newcastle Chronicle* in 1764. But this was not simply a question of self-publicising akin to vanity publishing. Nor can it be assumed that these advertisements were used to fill unsold space in the newspapers. Eighteenth century provincial newspapers often carried large numbers of advertisements for products sold by the proprietor, but it would make no commercial sense to repeatedly promote a book, or any other product, that did not attract a sizeable customer base; if for no other reason than because an advertising tax of one shilling was imposed as part of the 1712 Stamp Act, and this was doubled in 1757.[35] Moreover, the column inches in a newspaper were limited, and selling advertising space was an important revenue stream for the proprietor. By the time that the *Newcastle Chronicle* was established, with the subtitle of *'General Weekly Advertiser'*, to place an advertisement cost '3s. 6d. (not exceeding 20 lines) when first inserted and then 2s. 6d. for subsequent appearances'.[36] It is also worth noting that Fisher's husband wrote several merchant's handbooks, such as *The Banker's Sure Guide: or, Monied man's assistant*, and *The British Negociator: or, Foreign exchanges made perfectly easy*,[37] and yet these were not regularly re-advertised in the same way as his wife's publications. Fisher's prominence in the advertising columns can, therefore, be seen as testimony to the popularity of her books.

[35] R. M. Wiles, *Freshest Advices: Early Provincial Newspapers in England* (Columbus, Ohio, 1965), pp, 153-154.
[36] *Newcastle Chronicle*, 22 June 1765.
[37] Published under the pseudonym of S. Thomas.

The saleability of Fisher's books does not, however, tell us much about who was using them, whereas a survey of the notices from schools advertising their curriculum in Newcastle's newspapers provides concrete evidence of Fisher's influence in the classroom. Looking at every fifth year between 1730 and 1785, a total of 146 advertisements for schools were placed in Newcastle's three enduring newspapers, the *Newcastle Courant*, *Newcastle Journal*, and *Newcastle Chronicle*. Eighty-nine of these made reference to their curriculum, of which fifty-two specifically mentioned the teaching of English, as opposed to reading and writing. References were made to the teaching of English grammar during the 1730s and 1740s, but these only became prevalent during the 1760s, by which time it was not unlikely that English would be taught alongside Latin. But, in a shift that coincided with the apparent revival of more traditional schooling, by 1780 fewer schools referred to the teaching of grammar in any language.[38] The advertisements for Fisher's school were some of the earliest to refer to the teaching of English and the notice placed in 1750 was certainly the most detailed in terms of describing the nature of the English lessons. This notice was made all the more striking by the fact that it was a girls' school ran by a female pedagogue. Based on the advertising in Jackson's *Oxford Journal* between 1760 and 1829, Susan Skedd has noted that female teachers tended to offer a highly restricted curriculum that was limited to the practical skills of housewifery, such as needlework. In her sample group very few taught reading, and only one offered writing.[39] Fisher's school for young ladies was, therefore, unconventional from a national perspective. But, in a local context, although it was an early example of a school teaching grammar to girls, it was far from unique.

[38] For a more detailed account of the advertisements found see Crosbie, 'The Rising Generation', chapter two.
[39] Susan Skedd, 'Women Teachers and the Expansion of Girls' Schooling in England', pp. 101-125.

There were thirty-three advertisements in Newcastle's newspapers from twenty-one different schools run by women during the years sampled. Of those that referred to their curriculum, twelve offered writing, nine of which also taught English grammar. A man was often employed to undertake such tuition, as was the case in Mrs. Russell's boarding school in Yarm in 1770, where girls were offered 'READING, and all sorts of NEEDLE-WORK', whilst 'English Grammar, Writing, and Arithmetic, if required, are taught by a clergy who attends the school'.[40] In contrast, in 1785, J. Wear undertook the task of teaching English grammar alongside the 3Rs in her school in Newcastle, and bought in the skills of 'an able teacher of needlework'.[41] By this time even a governess might be expected to offer grammar alongside more traditional girls' education. For example, 'A young woman' seeking employment in a boarding school or private family in 1770 offered to teach grammar alongside needlework skills; informing the readers of the Newcastle Chronicle that she had been taught English grammar by an eminent teacher.[42] It could be argued that the north-eastern counties offered a somehow more conducive environment for female intellectual endeavour. Newcastle was, after all, the birthplace of Mary Astell (1666-1731) and Elizabeth Elstob (1683-1756), two of the most notable female intellectuals of their day. But neither of these women had lived in Newcastle as adults and so this link may be overly tenuous. The same cannot be said in the case of Anne Fisher. This was a woman who regularly advertised the virtues of girls' education in the local press, even if she did not readily advertise her gender after 'Mrs. Fisher's School' closed its doors.

[40] *Newcastle Journal*, 9 February 1765; *Newcastle Courant*, 31 March 1770.
[41] *Newcastle Chronicle*, 12 March 1785.
[42] *Ibid*, 21 April 1770.

Fisher's influence was not limited to girls' education. When William Tate notified the public that he was extending his 'reading school' in South Shields to teach English grammar in 1770, he paraphrased Fisher, suggesting that 'any young person of a tolerable capacity, may in a short Time, be taught to write English with great propriety and exactness independent of the Knowledge of any other Languages'.[43] As was the case in the majority of the schools that advertised, Tate did not specify the sex of his pupils, but there were reading and writing schools that used the provision of a separate room for girls as a selling point, which suggests that many of their rivals had mixed-sex classes. There were also more advanced schools that taught both sexes and surprisingly some of these were endowed grammar schools.[44] This questions the general assumption that these were exclusively male institutions, but these mixed-sex schools were not necessarily offering the same curriculum to girls. For instance, in 1770 Thomas Tunstall, the 'Master of the Free Grammar-school at Yarm', taught boys 'Greek, Latin and English in the most perfect and expeditious Manner', while 'Young Ladies [were to] be taught English grammatically ... in a separate apartment'.[45]

Such distinctions could also be made on the basis of social rank. In 1770 George Busby, the schoolmaster of Gateshead Grammar School, offered English alongside the classics, teaching the former to 'young ladies' and 'Boys that are not designed for the Liberal professions'. We do not know for sure which English grammar Busby used in Gateshead. But five years earlier, when teaching in Sunderland, he informed the readers of the *Newcastle Chronicle* that he was to run

[43] *Ibid*, 1 December 1770.
[44] Robinson identifies several northern grammar schools that accepted female pupils, these being Addingham Barton, Bishop Auckland, Belford, Crosby, Ravensworth, Darlington, Hugill, Haydon Bridge, Measand, Rothbury, Selside, Thursby, Workington, Wooler, Waitby and Smardale, Windermere and Troutbeck; Robinson, 'Trends in Education', p. 210 and fnt.6. p. 225.
[45] *Newcastle Journal*, 24 November 1770.

evening classes 'to teach English grammar to those young Ladies and Gentlemen that cannot attend during the day', and paraphrasing Fisher he suggested that 'It has been experienced in this Part of the Country that, any Youth of a tolerable capacity who can read, may in half a year be taught to write English as properly and correctly as if for the press'.[46] Furthermore, he went on to repeat Fisher's critical comments about rote learning and to echo her claim that a scholar of English would find it easier to acquire the knowledge of other languages, as he:

> presume[d] to observe, "that whatever may be pretended, or whatever Pains taken by Rote, no proper Manner of Spelling, no continuing, correct and infallible Manner of Speaking and Writing, can possibly be ascertained, without a true Knowledge of Grammar in all its Parts;" and that Boys thus instructed in English, will acquire the Knowledge of other Languages with more Ease and Expedition than can well be imagined; Grammar (except in some peculiar Idioms) being the same in all Languages.

The evidence of Fisher's direct influence in local schools is, therefore, unequivocal and yet the significance of these newspaper advertisements should not be overstated. It was usually when schools wished to inform the public of a change in their circumstances that they advertised, and very few long-established schools that maintained traditional methods appeared in the advertising columns. The only notable example being Mrs Hutchinson's school in Newcastle which was regularly advertised, even though it never changed premises or ownership, and never referred to any other subject but needlework. In more general terms, the school notices demonstrate that English was being added to the syllabus in a range of different settings as part of wider educational developments that saw the traditional curriculum expanded to include a greater range of subjects. But it is not usually possible to determine which teaching methods were being used or which form of English grammar was being taught. For instance, when the English School in Jedburgh advertised for pupils for

[46] *Newcastle Chronicle*, 27 July 1765, 20 January 1770.

the coming academic year, in 1760, it was stated that they would be taught 'English after the new Method' alongside a range of other subjects including 'Bookkeeping, Practical Geometry ... the Use of Globes, Geography, Navigation, with several other Parts of the Mathematics'.[47] This notice was accompanied by a ringing endorsement of the new schoolmaster, Arthur Elliot, in the form of the following comments from the Town Clerk:

> our ENGLISH SCHOOL was visited by the Magistrates and several other Gentlemen of this Place, and the Children were examined in the several Branches of Literature belonging thereto, where they had made such Proficiency, in the course of two Months, (which Time the Master had only been settled here) that the Magistrates thought it their Duty, in Justice to the Master, to cause this be inserted in the News-Papers for the Benefit of the Public.

It is not improbable that Elliot was using Fisher's *New Grammar*. His methods were being praised as efficient, which is in keeping with Fisher's claims. But it was, by this time, fifteen years since her grammar had first been published, so it can not be assumed that her approach would still be considered 'new'. That said, Fisher's books were being used in at least some of the schools that were offering a more 'modern' curriculum. In the case of Brampton grammar school (one of the most renowned schools in the north of England), up until 1757 the list of books given away to the less affluent scholars came 'within the compass of classics or divinity; after this date the list includes ten Arithmetic books ... and English textbooks including seven by Ann Fisher.'[48]

Fisher's grammar did not survive into the nineteenth century. But the educational innovations that she helped to promote can not be dismissed as a mid-century anomaly without lasting influence. Attitudes towards the teaching of grammar

---

[47] *Newcastle Journal*, 27 September 1760.
[48] Robinson, 'Trends in Education', p.111; also see Rodríguez-Gil, 'First Female Grammarian', un-paginated.

had been transformed. This can be clearly seen in the case of Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (published in 1762). This was one of the three grammars published during the eighteenth century that would spawn more editions than Fisher's. Lowth (who would become the bishop of London in 1777) had produced a Latinate English grammar, but reflecting the influence of the mid-century vernacular grammarians, he did not rigidly adhere to Latin form. Moreover, he not only thought that pupils should be introduced to grammar in a language they were already familiar with, he lamented that more of 'our schools' had not adopted this approach, which would prevent the need for 'so much labour of the memory, with so little assistance of the understanding.'[49] Similarly, in 1758 Eton School published a substantially revised version of William Lily's *Short Introduction to Latin Grammar*, entitled *An Introduction to the Latin Tongue, For the Use of Youth*. Lily's grammar had formed the mainstay of a Classical education for generations of grammar school scholars, and as Nancy Mace suggests, in the Eton version this text was greatly condensed and whole sections designed to be committed to memory by the scholar were omitted altogether.[50] This innovation was only possible because an increasing number of Latin scholars had a solid grounding in English grammar before they embarked upon their classical education; and there is evidence of at least one scholar who attended Eton in the early 1760s having apparently used Fisher's grammar before arriving at his new school. This was Ralph Gray, from Backworth, just north of Newcastle, whose father had included Fisher's grammar in his 'plan of education'.[51]

In the preface to her *Spelling Dictionary* (1774) Fisher made the unashamedly bold claim that 'all the best English school masters in the kingdom consider mine as

[49] Robert Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (London, 1762), pp. xiv, xiii.
[50] Nancy A Mace, 'The History of the Grammar Patent from 1620 to 1800 and the Forms of Lily's Latin Grammar', *Papers for the Bibliographical Society of America*, 100 (2006), p. 216.
[51] Note book 1752-55, unpaginated, Ralph William Gray Papers, NRO 753, Box G.

the quickest and most effectual mode of inculcating the knowledge of the English language'.[52] The geographic reach of her grammar was sufficiently wide ranging to make such a claim. It was repeatedly republished in London and advertised in the capital's newspapers. Pirated copies were printed in several provincial towns, and even the *Barbados Mercury* recommended 'the careful perusal of Fisher's English Grammar' in 1784.[53] That said, Fisher's greatest influence was closer to home, and the more modest claim made in an appendix to the fifteenth edition of her grammar may have had more justification. Here it was suggested that 'No additional Praxis of bad Spelling will be necessary to those who have learned English in the modern Way, practiced in the northern Counties'.[54] Marrying a printer had evidently been a sound career move and having established a newspaper was undoubtedly advantageous in terms of promoting her books locally. The success of her *New Grammar* was also a spur to others and far more grammars were published in Newcastle than in any other provincial town.[55] But this also reflected Newcastle's position as one of the largest provincial print centres in England; which in turn owed much to the fact that the town acted as a regional distribution hub connecting a vast area from Scottish borders down into the northernmost parts of Yorkshire and Lancashire.[56] It should also be remembered that the growing number of printers in Newcastle had a vested interest in encouraging improved standards of literacy, whether or not they were married to an author of educational books.

Literacy rates provide perhaps the most telling evidence of Fisher's influence and the interdependent nature of the relationship between educational provision and

[52] Anne Fisher, *An Accurate New Spelling Dictionary*, 6th edn. (London, 1788), p. iv.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Anne Fisher, *A Practical New Grammar*, 15th edn. (London, 1795), p. 182.
[55] Rodríguez-Gil, 'Ann Fisher: First Female Grammarian', unpaginated.
[56] Berry, 'Promoting Taste in the Provincial Press', pp. 1-17; Crosbie, 'Provincial Purveyors of Culture', forthcoming; Gardner 'John White and the Newcastle Newspaper Trade', pp. 71-92.

the print trade more generally. As Rab Houston has pointed out, in the mid to late seventeenth century, the northernmost counties of England had higher than average levels of illiteracy (based upon the ability to sign an official document). Yet a little over a century later the area was one of the most literate; second only to London, according to Roger Schofield, with less then twenty per cent of men unable to sign their name by the end of the 1830s. This is in stark contrast to the least literate areas, and male illiteracy at marriage in Bedford and Hertfordshire was three times higher than in Northumberland, Cumberland, and Westmoreland.[57] It is also telling that Houston pointed to northern England alongside Scotland, Sweden and Holland as having some of the best educated populations in Europe.[58] Looking at national averages, male literacy rates were relatively stagnant between 1750 and 1840, whereas female illiteracy fell from around sixty-four per cent to just under fifty per cent; and again this must mask considerable regional variation.[59] These improvements are small when compared to the advances of the later nineteenth century, but it is surely significant that grammar had become a subject suitable for girls. David Vincent has suggested it was only with the publication of Lindley Murray's grammar in 1795 that it became 'possible to teach and learn Grammar without a knowledge of the Classics', but Fisher's *New Grammar* had, in fact, made this possible half a century earlier.[60]

---

[57] R. A. Houston, 'The Development of Literacy: Northern England, 1640-1750', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 35:2 (1982), p. 199; Roger Schofield, 'Dimensions of Illiteracy, 1750-1850', *Explorations in Economic History*, 10:4 (1973), esp. p. 444.
[58] Rab Houston, 'The Literacy Myth?: Illiteracy in Scotland 1630-1760', *Past & Present*, No. 96 (1982), p. 99. Also W. B. Stephens, 'Literacy in England, Scotland, and Wales, 1500-1900', *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Special Issue on the History of Literacy (1990), pp. 545-571.
[59] Schofield, 'Dimensions of Illiteracy', p. 445.
[60] Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, p. 181.

When Fisher's remains were laid to rest in St John's churchyard in Newcastle in 1778, she was described by a family friend, in a letter of condolence to her husband, as a 'celebrated and venerable Lady'. This 'dearest' of friends wrote:

> It is not in the lesser circle of her domestic connections, only, that Mrs. Slack will be ... lamented. In her, the literary Republic has lost one of its highest female ornaments ... Her distinguished Character will be viewed and held sacred by all the Sons and Daughters of Science; and she shall be respectfully mentioned to all succeeding Generations.[61]

Fisher's reputation did not have the longevity suggested in this affectionate obituary, but she had helped to establish a more practical curriculum that would have lasting effect. English grammar had become commonplace regardless of the type of schooling received, and Fisher's *New Grammar* had made an important contribution to this educational development. It was, however, the mutually-beneficial marriage between printers and pedagogues that had made this possible.

[61] Letter to Thomas Slack from J. Teasdale of Moor End, 5 May 1778, Papers of the Hodgson Family 1773-1890, TWAS, 13/11/4 (emphasis appears original, but may have been added at a later date).